

Are we secure?

BY STEVEN MAYER, Californian staff writer
e-mail: smayer@bakersfield.com | Saturday, Sep 9 2006 8:45 PM

Last Updated: Saturday, Sep 9 2006 8:49 PM

Do you feel safer today than you did five years ago? Do you feel \$9.5 million safer?

PHOTOS:



Chief Doug Greener with two new vehicles for the Bakersfield Fire Department.

Photo by felix adamo

In the years since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, more than \$9.5 million in federal tax money has flowed into Kern County in the form of domestic preparedness equipment grants, Homeland Security grants and law enforcement terrorism prevention funds.

More than \$8 million, or about 85 percent of the total, has been spent on equipment, from dozens of gas masks, binoculars and digital cameras for police, to massive rescue trucks and decontamination equipment for firefighters and the people they may someday help.

Liquid chemical splash-resistant clothing, mobile radios, thermal imaging cameras and specialized tools for bomb technicians are just a few of the items listed on pages of equipment acquisitions.

Thanks to Homeland Security money, law enforcement and fire agencies will have access to such military-type equipment as night-vision goggles, night-vision binoculars and laser range finders.

"On the morning of 9/11, the biggest fire department and the biggest police department in the country couldn't handle that crisis," said Bakersfield Fire Department Capt. Garth Milam.

"So we look at the big picture now, not just the city of Bakersfield -- and that's new for us."

A multi-agency mission

No more turf battles, Milam said. The days of emergency services agencies protecting their own little fiefdoms must end -- and has ended in Kern County, he said. The threat is too great for any one agency.

On a recent afternoon at the fire department's training facility near Olive Drive, about a dozen men and women sweated inside hooded chemical-resistant suits as they trained to decontaminate patients affected by a terrorism- or industry-related chemical or biological release.

Local hospitals, the Kern County Health Department and the city fire department were all involved.

As trainees washed down a plastic life-sized doll on a stretcher, another group of medical professionals was getting a tour of the fire department's new \$70,000 Metropolitan Medical Response System, a large enclosed trailer equipped with rows of showers and boxes of temporary clothing.

The mass decontamination unit has the capacity to clean chemicals from the bodies of large numbers of people -- whether they are contaminated by a terrorist attack or, more likely, accidentally sprayed with pesticides.

"A lot of the equipment has day-to-day applications," said Doug Greener, a battalion chief with the Bakersfield Fire Department. "The government wants us to be cost-effective, so it makes sense to choose equipment with a dual purpose."

Other big-ticket items include an urban search and rescue truck with a base cost of \$290,000, and a heavy utility vehicle with a built-in crane for \$90,000. The federal grants may not be used to pay the salaries of personnel.

Equipment, training, planning

Georgianna Armstrong has been living and breathing Homeland Security funding for five years. The manager of the Kern County Office of Emergency Services administers the

grants, so she has had to learn more about hazardous materials management and night-vision goggles than she ever could have imagined.

"We joke that each line item is its own universe," she said. "I've never been in a helicopter, but I can tell you more than you'll ever want to know."

When she looks back at the past five years, back at the way the various players have come together in a common mission, Armstrong says she is proud of what they've accomplished.

"Our first responders have worked together so well, so cooperatively," she said. "In some areas you don't have that. The meetings are a bloodbath. That has not occurred ever here."

Instead, representatives of the various agencies have been willing to have their wish lists postponed or adjusted in the interests of higher priorities in other agencies.

And as all this was happening, the county purchasing and accounting departments received no extra help, even as their workloads increased dramatically. Armstrong calls them "behind-the-scenes heroes."